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CIRCULATED FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF THE CHIEFS OF STAFF

DP 11/72(Final)

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CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE

DEFENCE POLICY STAFF

THE RATIONALE FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM STRATEGIC

NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCE

Report by the Defence Policy Staff

1. The Chiefs of Staff instructed (1) ACDS(Policy) to carry out a study to review the need for the United Kingdom to retain an effective strategic nuclear deterrent force in the longer term and the level of threat the force would be required to pose. The nuclear capabilities and political attitudes of our Allies were to be taken into account.
2. Our report is at Annex A.

Recommendation

3. We recommend that if they approve our report the Chiefs of Staff should forward it to the Secretary of State as an expression of their views.

Ministry of Defence, SW1

D W FRASER
Major General
Assistant Chief of the
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NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCEINTRODUCTION

1. Current Government policy is that we should possess a strategic nuclear capability; studies are in hand on the form that this should take in the future and the degree of collaboration with other nations which may come to appear politically and technically desirable or essential. Decisions have also been made or are pending on the matter of United Kingdom nuclear weapons systems and delivery means relevant to nuclear action below the level of strategic response (1). For the United Kingdom to continue to be a nuclear power will inevitably involve large expenditure over a considerable period.

2. It is therefore timely to consider once again what are the advantages to the United Kingdom - and to some of its allies - of our possession of a strategic nuclear deterrent. Not only is a restatement of those advantages desirable in terms of argument for the money involved; it may also help to point towards certain specific solutions as being more conducive to those advantages than would be others.

AIM

3. To review the need for the United Kingdom to retain a strategic nuclear deterrent force into the next generation and the level of threat such a force would need to pose to be effective.

SCOPE

4. Since in the timescale with which we are concerned the principal likely threat is that from the Soviet Union, our review is confined

Note:

1. MO 18/3 of 5 January 1972

to the relevance of the United Kingdom's strategic nuclear deterrent capability to the European theatre. Nevertheless when we come to examine the level of effectiveness required we include some consideration of its value for deterring other potentially hostile powers.

5. We first of all review the philosophy of nuclear deterrence per se and then relate this to the situation of the UK as a member of the Atlantic Alliance. We then go on to examine the implications of the UK possessing a deterrent capability first in the national context and secondly from the international aspect. We finally discuss the characteristics and level of effectiveness which a United Kingdom strategic deterrent will require.

PHILOSOPHY OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Strategic Weapons

6. For the purpose of this paper we use the following definition:

"Deterrence is achieved by the evident ability to inflict on a potential aggressor an unacceptable degree of damage together with the creation of sufficient belief in his mind that aggression would run the risk of this damage being inflicted.

7. The ultimate reason for the possession of strategic nuclear weapons by any Western nation is to ensure its own independence and survival by deterring attack on itself; the deterring of attack on those allies whose security is involved with its own may be a motivating factor but not the ultimate one.

8. In the first instance strategic nuclear weapons, provided that their second strike capability is generally assumed to be effective and sufficient, can clearly and credibly have a deterrent effect against strategic nuclear attack upon the possessor's homeland.

9. In the second place strategic nuclear weapons provide one of the elements of deterrence against conventional attack. There are two qualifications to this thought. First, it may be argued that the deterrent effect of the strategic weapon diminishes as the enemy threatens objectives less essential to the security of the possessor; for example, it could certainly be argued that our own possession of strategic nuclear forces may be more credible (in Soviet eyes) in the context of conventional attack upon the United Kingdom itself (since the alternative could be subjugation) than in the context simply of attack against our "forward positions" on the Continent of Europe. Second, as a corollary, strategic nuclear action as a response - or threatened response - to conventional attack upon an ally's territory rather than the possessor's own may reasonably be regarded as less credible. "Credible" means "credible at all times in the face of the enemy capabilities". The credibility level is therefore inevitably high.

10. However, some capability for strategic nuclear action, because it constitutes the upper limit of military response, is clearly not only one of the elements of deterrence against conventional attack but the key element, since it alone can threaten the homeland of the aggressor with unacceptable damage. Deterrence, in the round, consists in providing for those measures which can make that threat credible, and is weakened by any measures - or lack of them - which could reduce credibility.

11. We turn now to the question of deterrence within an alliance and consider it in a European and NATO context.

12. There are two opposing views of NATO nuclear strategy; the first might be called the Solidarity argument and its rationale runs as follows:

a. The Alliance is based on the principle that an armed attack upon one of its members in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all (2).

Note:

2. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty

b. The security of the Alliance is dependent upon the credibility, in Soviet eyes, of United States involvement in the defence of Europe at levels of conflict up to and including the strategic nuclear exchange.

c. United States' interests in Europe - economic, strategic and ideological - can be counted on to continue; moreover, those interests, coupled with the continued and evident possession of a valid deterrent, are sufficient to make any attack on Europe appear an unacceptably risky proposition to the Soviet leaders.

d. Any measures to provide "alternative insurance policies" against the possibility of the United States coming to the conclusion that their own national security is less bound up with Europe, or against United States' reluctance to escalate conflict for fear of retaliation against America, will be counter-productive, and will lead to the very tendencies they would seek to offset. Dependence, in other words, is safer than any measures of independence, and must be demonstrated to friend and enemy alike.

From these premises, and especially from d, it can also be argued that:

e. The provision by any member of the Alliance, apart from the United States, of a strategic nuclear capability of any kind is unnecessary, runs counter to rational principles of distribution of effort within the Alliance, represents a waste of resources and may encourage Soviet leaders to conclude that the minor allies in NATO have some sound reason for distrusting the stated level of US commitment to the Alliance.

13. The other view might be called the argument of Ultimate

Self-interest, namely:

- a. No nation can be expected to risk self-immolation (the possible price of strategic nuclear action in an age of second-strike capability) to ensure the territorial integrity of an ally, however close that ally.
 - b. No nation, therefore, can be absolutely relied upon to accept the risks inherent in escalating conventional conflict to the strategic nuclear level on behalf of an ally, unless its own existence is clearly and inevitably threatened as a result of that attack.
 - c. It follows that the United States has the strongest motive of all the allies to prevent a European conflict escalating to the strategic nuclear level (since America's territorial integrity is only at risk at that level).
 - d. Thus it could reasonably appear dubious to an aggressor, calculating from the argument of American ultimate self-interest, that the United States would actually use strategic nuclear weapons. (These doubts could be accentuated by developments in SALT and by any reduction in the United States' conventional forces in Europe, whether offset by similar Soviet reductions or not). Deterrence therefore would be defective and aggression conceivable.
 - e. The United States' interest cannot in perpetuity be assumed, and no Alliance lasts for ever.
- From these premises two parallel and fundamental points can also be derived:
- f. No nation without actual and physical ability to escalate the conflict to the level of effective strategic nuclear action has ultimate power over its own defence. Any nation with that ability has that power.

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g. Deterrence in the context of Soviet action against Europe - including the United Kingdom - is defective unless the power to escalate the conflict is actually possessed by at least some European nations whose territory is at risk; and those nations, in the last resort, are likely to be secure from external attack against themselves, only provided that their retaliatory strategic capability is effective and can be seen to be able to survive.

Tactical Use

14. Where the tactical use of nuclear weapons is concerned, it is for consideration whether the sort of ranges and sizes of the weapons generally implied by "tactical use" necessitate separate argument, or whether their use is subsumed in the main debate, whose extreme limits have been set out above. While we appreciate that such weapons could be used by the Soviet Union on, for example, airfields and other military targets in the United Kingdom, we see no possibility of separating by definition such strikes from those on other targets; and we do not believe that nuclear strikes on this country could be classified as other than strategic. In the context of this paper we therefore define "tactical use" as use which does not strike the territory (as opposed to the forces) of a nuclear power. The United States' distinction between "strategic" and "theatre" conflict has little meaning to a European nuclear power.

15. The function of tactical nuclear weapons (ie weapons designed primarily for battlefield use) in NATO strategy is to provide an essential link between conventional defences and the strategic nuclear weapon systems (3), thus strengthening the deterrent effect of the former and the credibility of the latter. Tactical nuclear weapon systems are deployed in close association with conventional forces. The enemy must therefore recognise the risk that, if he should attack

Note:

3. DPC/D(69)58 (Revised)

at a level which NATO could not hold conventionally then NATO, under pressure, might use the nuclear weapons deployed. Their presence in the defensive systems therefore faces an enemy with an imponderable risk of escalation, since once the nuclear threshold has been crossed the conflict enters a new dimension in which the risk of involvement of strategic weapons against the aggressor's homeland cannot be ruled out. The significance of tactical nuclear weapons therefore lies not so much in their potential operational effectiveness as in their contribution to the deterrent. Their possession helps to deter an aggressor from initiating an aggression in the hope of achieving quick success by conventional means alone; their use by NATO could also deter the continuance or widening of a conventional aggression already under way.

16. As in all nuclear matters, however, the initiator's risks are high, and it must be credible that the initiator - in the context of this discussion by definition the defender - would himself be prepared to face the risks of escalation.

17. It is possible to argue that credibility in the field of tactical use is different in kind from the issue of credibility in strategic use, simply because tactical use itself implies a deliberate restraint from strategic use - a deliberate avoidance, in fact of striking the homeland of the only nuclear power at present opposed to us. It can be argued therefore that whereas a nation like the United States which is critically vulnerable only to strategic nuclear attack and not to other forms of attack, has every incentive to keep conflict below the strategic level, it has less incentive to keep it below the level of obvious tactical use; that tactical use is therefore only a limited indicator of a willingness to contemplate strategic use and is thus an inconsiderable factor in deterrence.

18. Nevertheless it is generally accepted that the tactical use of nuclear weapons, by crossing a threshold, introduces a new and potentially cataclysmic dimension to the conflict and if it carries

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increased hazard of escalation to the strategic level (or is sufficiently believed so to do) the same factors of credibility will apply, albeit in diminished degree, as apply to strategic use. It is not considered therefore that the question of the tactical use of nuclear weapons introduces a new chain of argument. It suffices to say that to be able to use nuclear weapons in this way is an essential element in the current strategy of deterrence.

THE UNITED KINGDOM POSITION

19. In the face of rising defence costs, the development of the NATO Alliance and criticisms of an "independent" capability on grounds of superfluity, the United Kingdom has sought presentationally to minimise "independence" and adopt the line that the British deterrent is an adjunct to the United States capability as a NATO declared force (although we still provide the only nuclear capability organic to CENTO). Nevertheless, as specifically recognised in the NASSAU Agreement, our capability for independent action has been retained, despite our heavy dependence on the United States for material support and our reliance on them for Intelligence.

20. The United Kingdom position can be said, therefore, to be somewhere between the parameters given in paragraphs 12 and 13 above. The description of our nuclear capability as declared to NATO and, on occasions, as an adjunct to United States' capabilities would argue a belief in the Solidarity argument. No British Government however, has drawn the conclusion from this that our capability is unnecessary and redundant. This surely suggests, however stated, a belief in the argument of Ultimate Self-interest. In our view therefore an unqualified belief in the Solidarity argument cannot be sustained while simultaneously endorsing our present policy.

21. This is unsurprising since we find the Solidarity argument essentially unconvincing. As we have said, although the United States involvement in Europe is a vital element in the Alliances' deterrent

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strategy, it would be mistaken to place too much emphasis on what such involvement implies; we have already referred to the United States having a great incentive to keep conflict to the conventional - or, at the most tactical use - level since she is ultimately threatened only by strategic nuclear action. On the other hand, her allies could be threatened not only by that, but also by conventional air attack, invasion or blockade which they have not the conventional forces successfully to resist. They, therefore, have less disincentive to contemplate escalation. United States military authorities acknowledge this issue frankly and regard the achievement by the Soviets of parity in strategic nuclear power as likely to inhibit United States' decision-makers from taking action which might escalate to the level of strategic exchange in any context apart from a direct threat to the security of the United States itself.

22. Secondly, it is impossible to believe that the United Kingdom strategic nuclear capability makes any significant contribution to deterrence if seen purely as a subordinate element of United States' power. The continuance of a United Kingdom nuclear capability of any kind, purely on the military grounds of adding quantitatively to the striking power available to the Alliance would be very hard to justify; the United States' capability is too massive and the United Kingdom's contribution too minor for the military argument alone to run. The United Kingdom capability is significant only because it is under separate national control and because it thus presents an added factor of uncertainty. Moreover, in the NATO context, the United Kingdom's will to escalate to use of strategic nuclear weapons because, like France, we could not ultimately and in all circumstances defend ourselves by conventional means, might be regarded as more credible than that of the United States; at least the second centre of decision complicates the Soviet calculation of risks and deterrence is thereby enhanced.

23. We conclude, therefore, that it is the argument of Ultimate Self-interest - the argument in national terms - which does and should

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justify, as it always has really justified, our nuclear capability. Without this capability we are absolutely dependent upon the Alliance and in the last resort, on United States' will to provoke her own destruction on our behalf. This is the situation of all other European members of the Alliance, except France. All these arguments presuppose the ultimate ability of the British Government to use the deterrent independently if necessary in defence of vital interests; and it has been our consistent policy even within the Alliance to retain the ability to do so.

THE INTERNATIONAL POSITION

General

24. We have given our view that the major justification for a British Strategic nuclear deterrent is that of ultimate national self-interest. This is not to imply that this essentially national position is not also highly relevant in a NATO context, and in this part of our paper we consider this aspect, as well as the likely attitudes of our principal allies to the possession of our own nuclear capability.

25. It is possible in the timescale which we are considering to envisage the United States (in or outside the context of MBFRs) reducing their forces in Europe to a level at which their "hostage" value to an American strategic nuclear guarantee already eroded by SALT becomes progressively less credible. In this situation deterrence would be gravely at risk were one or more European nations not to possess a strategic nuclear capability.

26. This could be provided by one nation nominally "held in trust" for Europe, or by a deterrent force jointly funded and jointly controlled by European Governments. Since the latter, however, presupposes some degree of political integration which is not yet in sight, we do not consider it further in this paper. We believe that strategic nuclear forces are and in the foreseeable

future will remain, essentially responsive only to national decisions in the last resort; and unless or until Europe becomes a nation we do not consider that the concept of a European deterrent has meaning.

27. In Europe only France and the United Kingdom possess strategic nuclear deterrent forces. Of the remaining nations only Germany and Italy have the resources to develop a credible nuclear deterrent capability. Germany is inhibited by the Paris Agreement of 1954 and her possession of nuclear weapons would be anathema not only to the Soviet Union, but also to the rest of Europe and indeed to a wide range of opinion in Germany itself; while the strength of the Communist Party in Italy would thwart any attempt by that country to acquire an independent deterrent.

28. France clearly states that her deterrent must remain firmly under national control - an entirely logical position. But she is also ostentatiously aloof from NATO and although it is always possible that a change of personalities in the French Government could bring a change of attitude, a reversal of policy would have to confer significant advantages on the French and there are no immediate signs of it. In the absence of any change in French policy therefore, only the United Kingdom of European countries could provide a strategic deterrent ostensibly "for NATO".

29. It might be argued that this is unconvincing; that the facts of geography place Britain in a similar position to the United States, with interests in Europe, but physically separated by the sea. There are, however, essential differences. The United Kingdom is sufficiently close to the European members to be vulnerable to conventional attack from Warsaw Pact bases. This vulnerability would be increased should the rest of NATO Europe be overrun by Warsaw Pact forces. Furthermore the pressure that could be brought to bear by a Soviet dominated Continent, financially, industrially, and psychologically as well as militarily would probably be more than our isolated country could indefinitely withstand. Thus our